King's Speech Marked By Warmth, Humor, History and Reminders of Shared Purpose

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King Charles III passes through Statuary Hall with House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., prior to his speech before a joint meeting of Congress on April 28, 2026. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — King Charles III of Britain delivered a message of "reconciliation and renewal" during a speech before a joint meeting of Congress on Tuesday, his remarks coming as divisiveness flared across the United States.

The king briefly commented on a lone gunman's attack at the White House correspondents' dinner, offering sympathy to President Donald Trump and the 2,000 other people who attended the annual gathering celebrating the freedom of the press.

"Let me say with unshakeable resolve: such acts of violence will never succeed," the king said.

"Whatever our differences, whatever disagreements we may have, we stand united in our commitment to uphold democracy, to protect all our people from harm, and to salute the courage of those who daily risk their lives in the service of our countries," he continued.

Most of the king's speech, however, focused on the "special relationship" Great Britain has long shared with its former colony.

As it happens, King Charles's visit to the United States comes at a difficult time in the relationship between the two governments, with Trump being particularly piqued by Prime Minister Keir Starmer's refusal to participate in the war in Iran.

Speaking with a strong, clear and at the same time, reassuring tone, the king acknowledged that the United Kingdom and the United States have had their differences in the 250 years since the American Revolution, but he noted that at the end of the day, the "two countries have always found ways to come together."

After thanking the American people for welcoming him and Queen Camilla to the United States to "mark this semi-quincentennial year of the Declaration of Independence," he noted that in all of the time since the declaration was signed, "our destinies as Nations have been interlinked.

"As Oscar Wilde said, "We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language!" he quipped to the appreciation of the hundreds of lawmakers and others in attendance.

But he quickly turned more serious.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we meet in times of great uncertainty; in times of conflict from Europe to the Middle East which pose immense challenges for the international community and whose impact is felt in communities the length and breadth of our own countries," the king said.

"The challenges we face are too great for any one nation to bear alone," he continued. "But in this unpredictable environment, our alliance cannot rest on past achievements, or assume that foundational principles simply endure. As my prime minister said last month: 'ours is an indispensable partnership. We must not disregard everything that has sustained us for the last eighty years. Instead, we must build on it.'

"Renewal today starts with security. The United Kingdom recognizes that the threats we face demand a transformation in British defense. That is why our country, in order to be fit for the future, has committed to the biggest sustained increase in defense spending since the Cold War," the king said.

"This year, of course, also marks the 25th anniversary of 9/11. This atrocity was a defining moment for America and your pain and shock were felt around the whole world. During my visit to New York, my wife and I will again pay our respects to the victims, the families, and the bravery shown in the face of terrible loss. We stood with you then. And we stand with you now in solemn remembrance of a day that shall never be forgotten.

"In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when NATO invoked Article 5 for the first time, and the United Nations Security Council was united in the face of terror, we answered the call together — as our people have done so for more than a century, shoulder to shoulder, through two World Wars, the Cold War, Afghanistan and moments that have defined our shared security."

The king said the "same, unyielding resolve" is needed today "for the defense of Ukraine and her most courageous people."

"From the depths of the Atlantic to the disastrously melting ice-caps of the Arctic, the commitment and expertise of the United States Armed Forces and its allies lie at the heart of NATO, pledged to each other's defense, protecting our citizens and interests, keeping North Americans and Europeans safe from our common adversaries," the king said.

"Our defense, intelligence and security ties are hardwired together through relationships measured not in years, but in decades," he continued.

Only by continuing to stand together, the king suggested, would a "truly just and lasting peace" in the Ukraine be possible.

"It is my hope — my prayer — that, in these turbulent times, working together and with our international partners, we can stem the beating of ploughshares into swords," he said.

Though the king stayed largely above the political fray, as is his custom, he did not allow the opportunity pass to address, however obliquely, Trump's particularly brutal assessment of the British Navy after the United Kingdom declined his invitation to join in the Iran war. At one point, Trump referred to the country's battleships as "toys."

"I served with immense pride in the Royal Navy, following in the Naval footsteps of my father, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh; my grandfather, King George VI; my great-uncle, Lord Mountbatten; and my great-grandfather, King George V," the king said.

He also noted that "today, thousands of U.S. service personnel, defense officials and their families are stationed in the United

Kingdom, as British personnel serve with equal pride across 30 American States.

"We are building F-35s together. And we have agreed the most ambitious submarine program in history — AUKUS — in partnership with Australia, a country of which I am also immensely proud to serve as sovereign," he said.

Time and again during his remarks, however, the king returned to the theme of "reconciliation and renewal," and his belief that it has produced what he will call "one of the greatest alliances in human history."

"Standing here today, it is hard not to feel the weight of history on my shoulder — because the modern relationship between our two nations and our own peoples spans not merely 250 years, but over four centuries," he said.

"It is extraordinary to think that I am the nineteenth in our line of sovereigns to study, with daily attention, the affairs of America," he continued.

Referring to the U.S. Congress as a "citadel of democracy created to represent the voice of all American people to advance sacred rights and freedoms," he said that as he stood in "this renowned chamber of debate and deliberation" he could not help but think of his late mother, Queen Elizabeth II, who addressed Congress from the same podium 35 years earlier.

"As you may know, when I address my own Parliament at Westminster, we still follow an age-old tradition and take a member of Parliament 'hostage,' holding him or her at Buckingham Palace until I am safely returned," the king said. "These days, we look after our 'guest' rather well — to the point that they often do not want to leave!

"Mr. Speaker, were there any volunteers for that role here today...?" he asked, once again eliciting peels of laughter from the chamber.

"As I look back across the centuries ... there emerge certain patterns; certain self-evident truths from which we can learn and draw mutual strength," the king said.

"With the Spirit of 1776 in our minds, we can perhaps agree that we do not always agree — at least in the first instance! Indeed, the very principle on which your Congress was founded — no taxation without representation — was at once a fundamental disagreement between us, and at the same time a shared democratic value which you inherited from us," he said.

"Ours is a partnership born out of dispute, but no less strong for it ... So perhaps, in this example, we can discern that our nations are in fact instinctively like-minded — a product of the common democratic, legal and social traditions in which our governance is rooted to this day.

"Drawing on these values and traditions, time and again, our two countries have always found ways to come together. And by Jove, Mr. Speaker, when we have found that way to agree, what great change is brought about — not just for the benefit of our peoples, but of all peoples," the king said.

Later in his remarks — a speech interrupted more than 10 times by standing ovations — the king reflected on how even the nation's capital symbolized a period "in our shared history, or what Charles Dickens might have called 'A Tale of Two Georges': the first president, George Washington, and my five-times great grandfather, King George III," he said.

"King George never set foot in America and, please rest assured, I am not here as part of some cunning rearguard action!" he added.

"The Founding Fathers were bold and imaginative rebels with a cause," he continued. "Two-hundred-and-fifty years ago (or, as we say in the United Kingdom, just the other day…) they declared Independence.

"By balancing contending forces and drawing strength in diversity, they united 13 disparate colonies to forge a nation on the revolutionary idea of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,'" the king said. "They carried with them, and carried forward, the great inheritance of the British Enlightenment — as well as the ideals which had an even deeper history in English Common Law and Magna Carta.

"These roots run deep, and they are still vital. Our Declaration of Rights of 1689 was not only the foundation of our constitutional monarchy, but also provided the source of so many of the principles reiterated — often verbatim — in the American Bill of Rights of 1791," he said. "And those roots go even further back in our history: the U.S. Supreme Court Historical Society has calculated that Magna Carta is cited in at least 160 Supreme Court cases since 1789, not least as the foundation of the principle that executive power is subject to checks and balances.

"This is the reason why there stands a stone, by the River Thames at Runnymede where Magna Carta was signed in the year 1215. This stone records that an acre of that ancient and historic site was given to the U.S.A. by the people of the United Kingdom, to symbolize our shared resolve in support of liberty, and in memory of President John F. Kennedy," he continued.

"Distinguished members of the 119th Congress, it is here in these very halls that this spirit of liberty and the promise of America's founders is present in every session and every vote cast; Not by the will of one, but by the deliberation of many, representing the living mosaic of the United States. " the king said.

King Charles's historic speech before the joint session of Congress was considered the centerpiece of his first visit to the U.S since he became Britain's monarch.

With his arrival in the well of the House chamber, he became the 11th king or queen from a foreign nation to address a joint meeting of Congress. The first such address occurred in December 1874. The king's mother, as he himself mentioned, addressed just such a session on May 16, 1991.

The royal couple's arrival at Joint Base Andrews on Monday afternoon kicked off two days of pomp and circumstance — and royal fever — in Washington.

The king, dressed in a blue suit, and the queen, wearing a pink coat dress, listened as the U.S. military band played the national anthems of Britain and the United States.

The king and queen were greeted by Monica Crowley, the State Department's top official in charge of protocol.

They walked through an honor cordon of U.S. military personnel before heading to the White House for their first formal stop.

There, the royal couple met briefly with the president and first lady outside the South Portico of the White House and viewed a new White House beehive.

The hive, unveiled on the South Lawn last week, is shaped like a miniature White House and is the home for two new bee colonies.

Officials said the visit to the beehive was a nod to the king's longstanding interest in environmental issues and conservation.

There are four beehives in the gardens around Buckingham Palace and two more outside Clarence House, the official residence of the royal couple.

Monday's events concluded with a garden party for the king and queen at the British Embassy, where hundreds of dignitaries waited hours in line to shake the king's hand.

Among those present were White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and his wife Katie Miller, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La.

The Trumps saw the royals again on Tuesday when they hosted a formal welcome at the White House featuring a ceremonial military review.

The ceremony, part of a tradition that dates back to the 18th century, featured the U.S. Marine Band playing the national anthems of both countries.

The Presidential Salute Battery conducted a 21-gun cannon salute and there was a flyover by four F-35 fighter jets.

Amidst all of these activities, the first couple and the royals climbed the steps to the south portico balcony to watch 300 U.S. service members pass in review — an event the White House called an historic first for state visits.

A state dinner was held in the East Room of the White House on Tuesday evening.

Among those in attendance were Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, a number of business titans, including Apple's departing CEO Tim Cook, Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sanchez, David Ellison, Marc Andreessen, and Stephen Schwarzman, Keith Poole, the top editor of the New York Post, Fox News personalities Jesse Watters, Bret Baier, Maria Bartiromo, Ainsley Earhardt, and Laura Ingraham, the first lady's father, Viktor

Knavs, her clothing designer Hervé Pierre, and her top aide, Hayley Harrison.

During the dinner Charles presented the president with a gold bell that had hung in the conning tower of a British submarine, the HMS Trump, during World War II.

"Should you ever need to get hold of us … just give us a ring" the king said

The royal couple will be staying at Blair House, across the street from the White House for the balance of their visit.

On Wednesday morning they will travel to New York City to lay a wreath at the Sept. 11 memorial and participate in a gala that evening. The king will also visit a youth organization in Harlem, and the queen will participate in an event at the New York Public Library.

On Thursday, the royal couple visit Arlington Cemetery before heading to rural parts of Virginia for a series of events.

After leaving the U.S., the king will pay a visit to Bermuda, where he is also head of state. It will be his first royal visit as monarch to a British overseas territory, before returning to the United Kingdom.

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